

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 26THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
24 March 1981

Parochial America

By Charles W. Bray III

From remarks by the former deputy director of the International Communication Agency before a recent San Francisco conference on improving American competence in world affairs.

The first requirement for a competent foreign policy is to possess a historical perspective. It is not merely that those who do not recall the past are condemned to repeat it. Knowledge of history provides individuals and nations with a sense for the ebbs and flows of events, reminds them that civilizations (our own included) rise and decline — and can be extinguished if not tended to — gives one a sense of identity and purpose, teaches patience, and provides object lessons in the value of persistence (surely not our longest national suit in foreign policy).

Americans are historical illiterates: our education provides us only with anecdotes about our own past and virtually no knowledge of the history of others. Yet we cannot hope to help manage history-in-the-making — and that ultimately is the purpose of foreign policy — without a knowledge of history-as-it-was-made.

The second such attribute is knowledge: factual and linguistic knowledge. What we readily grant with respect to the law or medicine or business of the military — that its practitioners must be knowledgeable to be effective — we have thus far failed to establish with respect to foreign policy.

Our public school systems persist in using 19th-century curricula to prepare citizens for the problems of international coping in the vastly more complex world of the 21st century. As our international interests and obligations grow at a rate that is almost geometric, we find that the percentage of colleges and universities requiring even minimal foreign language competence of the "educated" student has declined from 85 percent in 1915 to 34 percent in 1966 to 8 percent in 1980; or, to illustrate the problem in another way, while there are several thousand English-speaking Japanese businessmen in New York City alone, there are less than 100 Japanese-speaking American businessmen in Tokyo.

Fewer than one in 20 college students takes even one course dealing with foreign peoples or cultures; during the decade ending in 1977, a period when 2 million additional jobs became dependent upon exports, enrollments in college-level language courses declined by 21 percent. A scant 5 percent of all the teachers in this country have had any exposure to international studies and training.

The results should not be surprising: a poll reporting that 40 percent of high school seniors believed Israel to be an Arab nation or another noting that only 33 percent of all Americans could name any of the member agencies or institutions of the United Nations. Or a lengthy piece in the New York Times on the critical scarcity of language skills in our armed forces and intelligence agencies. The story quoted Congressman Panetta as saying: "There has to be a recognition of this as meeting a very real national security need, as important as development of a new weapon, as important as training a man to fight in hand-to-hand combat."

Yet this is a country in which one of every six manufacturing jobs produces for export and nearly \$1 of every \$3 of American corporate profits derives from international activities, exports, and foreign investments.

The problem does not end at the level of the private citizen. The Department of State assigns such a low priority to the development of skills in the Foreign Service that it provides no training — none! — in the art of negotiation. It sets scandalously low language standards for diplomats assigned abroad. One result: only 6 of 60 American diplomats in Iran during the revolutionary year of 1978 were even minimally proficient in the local language, and only two members of the remaining staff were fluent at the time the hostages were taken.

The greatest country in the free world is flying blind at a time when the international environment demands (1) a much greater American capacity to understand at least the major foreign cultures; (2) a significantly reduced tendency to think — as we do think, we citizens, we reporters, members of Congress, business people — in inaccurate, misleading stereotypes; and (3) the blunt bottom-line ability to live by our wits now that we are no longer wealthy enough to overwhelm our foreign problems by throwing dollars at them.

We are a parochial and insular people attempting to devise and conduct what must necessarily be a cosmopolitan and global foreign policy. It is a prescription for long-term trouble, perhaps disaster.

We face a "knowledge gap." Yet we do nothing in response. President Carter established a national Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. But he was too busy to receive his commission's report when it was completed, and neither the administration nor the Congress has acknowledged — much less taken any action on — the commission's recommendations.